K.M. Shea

Short Story Starter Pack

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CONTENTS

1. Calling of a King
2. Queen Ruby & Princess Snow
3. Before the Bond
4. Trials of A First Knight
5. The Princess Who Chased Sheep
6. From the Author

Other books by K. M. Shea

CALLING OF A KING

A KING ARTHUR AND HER KNIGHTS SHORT

This spoiler-free piece takes place before Britt—heroine of the King Arthur and Her Knights series—is drawn back through time to ancient Britain to serve as a substitute for the legendary King Arthur.

IT WASN'T SUPPOSED to be like this. King Arthur, the man who would unite Britain under the banner of one ruler, was supposed to be a known entity. Not an unknown pulled from a different time. Unfortunately, Merlin had no other choice.

The boy Merlin had painstakingly raised for the role—Arthur, a 15-year-old dolt and the only son of King Uther—had run off with a shepherdess.

Arthur's defection had caused Merlin considerable trouble. Merlin wasn't old—he had been barely more than a boy himself when Arthur was born—but he had spent all of his youth preparing the country and men of influence to be united. Unfortunately, the boy who was destined to rule over all of Britain was gone, leaving Merlin and his men with a country prepared to unite, but no king under which to unite it.

Merlin narrowed his eyes as he stared at the sword in the stone—the "miracle" sword he had spelled that could be pulled only by one of King Uther's blood. "I'll have to remove that part," he grumbled as he crouched over the sword and began

manipulating the spell. “Heavens know why I thought his bloodline was the right one to do this job—flighty, romantic fools, the lot of them!”

When he finished with the modification, he leaned back on his heels.

He had considered putting one of his loyal knights on the throne, but it would never work. Merlin had prepared for this day by declaring all across the country that somewhere there was a boy of King Uther’s bloodline—a boy, not a man. He would have to find a stand-in.

“But I’ll not leave room to make the same mistake again. *This* Arthur will be creditable. I will not waste my time on some boy who will run off whenever a maiden flutters her eyelashes at him!” Merlin stood and folded his arms across his chest, ignoring the chilly, winter breeze that tugged on his cloak.

He rolled up the sleeves of his robe and clenched his teeth. The next part of the sword enchantment would be tricky, because if he could not find a boy to pull the sword from the stone and become the one king of Britain, he would have to call one to him.

He stood and circled the sword. He flicked the hilt, hitting it with a spark of his magic. “The sword in the stone will move only for one who is honest and true—a king his vassals could trust.” The sword glowed as his words and magic begin twisting and expanding the spell.

“Bravery must fill his heart, and loyalty must lie deep in his bones,” Merlin continued. “He must be capable of compassion and possess valiance and courage. He must be fair enough to pass off as a youth but have wisdom beyond his age.”

He tugged his robe straight and cringed. Could there be such a man who could fulfill all these requirements? But he needed to be careful. A mere puppet wouldn’t do; this man would rightly and truly be *king*, even if Merlin planned to swarm the court with advisors.

“Most importantly, he must be worthy—worthy to rule Britain, worthy to hold great power, worthy to be King. Power

must not turn his head, and greed must never move him."

The sword hummed; sparks of magic orbited around it like miniature stars. "Whoso touches the sword and fulfills all these requirements, only he may pull the sword…and he will be brought back in time, if need be, through the use of this ancient faerie spell."

Merlin studied the piece of parchment he had brought with him, and carefully recited the enchantment. Faerie spells were tricky—a single misspoken word could ruin the entire thing. Merlin's palms were slick with sweat as he read the ancient incantation.

When he finished, he brushed the hilt of the sword with his thumbs—then leaped back when a beam of light plunged through the heavens, forming a halo around the sword. The cemetery in which the sword in the stone was kept rumbled, and Merlin was tossed to his knees when the ground shook.

So it shall be.

Merlin hadn't heard the words, but he felt them deep in his bones. The magic had settled. As soon as a person that fulfilled all of the requirements touched the sword, they would be brought back to Merlin's time.

He hoped the new king would be able to forgive him for wrenching him from his old life. "It cannot be helped. If Britain is to ever see progress, a rightful king must be found."

Merlin staggered to his feet and brushed off his cloak, glancing at the sword. Although the light and sparks of magic had disappeared, he could still feel the power that radiated from it. "It will take a strong individual to claim the sword in the stone and to activate that spell. Whomever the magic brings, I will be glad to serve."

He sourly shook his head, breaking his reverie. "It is time to rouse Sir Ector and Kay from drowning their sorrows at the tavern. Soon, our king will arrive." Merlin glanced over his shoulder at the sword. "At least, I hope he will. I know not what

we will do if no men are found worthy. I can only hope our future king is now making his way to the sword."

Britt smothered a yawn and reached for her chocolate chip frappe.

"I want to go to Tintagel Castle," Lyssa said. She tapped a manicured nail on the paper map of Britain spread across the sticky table.

Amber smiled at the male barista when he glanced in their direction. "Why?"

"It's nowhere near any of the other sights we're going to see." Grace said.

"But we have to go," Lyssa said." It's the historic site of King Arthur's conception!"

Britt pinched the straw of her drink between her teeth. "First of all, that's totally gross, and I didn't need to know that. Secondly, that's impossible. King Arthur and his knights are fictional."

"That's not true. They are historical figures!" Lyssa said.

"Sure," Britt said. Her sarcasm was so strong she didn't even need to roll her eyes. "Just like Johnny Appleseed."

"Children, children," Amber said. She pulled her attention away from the barista. "We'll have an entire vacation to argue. For now, let's stay out of the ring and plan the rest of our trip."

"We can't go to Tintagel Castle," Grace said. "You already have us going out of our way for a number of other historical sites that are supposedly related to King Arthur. I understand your passion, but we all have things we want to see. You'll have to prioritize."

Lyssa sighed. "Fine."

Heartened, Britt sipped her drink again and looked away. She'd been reluctant to agree to the trip, not because she didn't love her friends or think it would be fun, but because Lyssa was

crazy for King Arthur. She had been afraid that her friend's passion would hijack the trip, but thankfully she was not the only one who didn't want to parade across the UK to see every scrap of King Arthur lore that still supposedly existed.

Britt was not very fond of King Arthur—or any of his knights. The legends were frequently depressing; the knights were always killing one another; and above all, Britt had an all-consuming hatred for Lancelot and Queen Guinevere. She would never understand why Arthur's best friend betrayed him, and why Guinevere fell for Lancelot's charms. It was a hatred she had been taught at a very young age, when she first started fencing as a little girl.

But even if she ignored Lancelot, she still couldn't grasp the greatness of the King Arthur legends. Chivalry, real chivalry, was much more than prancing around the countryside on a horse, which is all King Arthur's knights seemed to do.

But everyone had their vices. Lyssa's was King Arthur; Britt's was Jane Austen. (And she had already been promised that they would visit Bath during their travels.) As long as the group made Lyssa keep her passion in check, Britt imagined their tour of the UK would be an entertaining and memorable trip.

If only she had known just how life-changing it would be…

THE END

QUEEN RUBY & PRINCESS SNOW

A SHORT STORY

*This mixed-up fairytale is an original short story. It has **no ties** to any of my fairy tale adaptions; however, for a short story with a similar style, check out "The Unicorn Procession" in the freebies section of my website.*

When Prince Phillip arrived in Amberly, he was taken to Queen Ruby's throne room. To call Ruby the queen was not quite accurate, as she was actually the acting regent for Princess Snow. Queen Ruby was Snow's step-mother, and she had married Snow's father, King Danner, two years prior. Unfortunately, King Danner passed away four months after the wedding, leaving Queen Ruby and Princess Snow to run the kingdom.

Phillip, the third son of the King of Warrend, was visiting Amberly to "improve relations between the countries" as his father said. In reality, his father had instructed him to woo either Queen Ruby or the 15-year-old Princess Snow. Amberly was a small, rich country that possessed fertile lands and one of the largest trade harbors in the world. Though Warrend was bigger and possessed more military might, they were badly in need of funds—funds that Amberly could provide if Phillip married the queen or princess.

As the younger of the two, ideally, Snow would be his bride. Yet, he had heard Queen Ruby was quite beautiful and has no intention of releasing her power as regent to Princess Snow. So, he would make his decision after observing them over his week-long stay.

The click of Phillip's boots echoed in the hallway as he marched towards the throne room. A herald announced his arrival as the doors swung open.

The rumors of Queen Ruby's beauty were not the exaggeration Phillip feared they would be. Queen Ruby had luxurious russet red hair that curled most pleasingly around her shoulders, complementing her ice-blue eyes and her fine features. She wore a gorgeous red silk gown embroidered with gold thread and an elegant gold crown perched on her head. Her smile was lovely, though Phillip could see it did not reach her eyes.

"Welcome to Amberly, Prince Phillip of Warrend. I hope you find your stay delightful, for we have long looked forward to your arrival as our guest." Queen Ruby's voice was as serene and untouched as a frozen lake.

Phillip bowed deeply. "Thank you for the warm welcome. I cannot tell you how I have longed to visit Amberly. My father told me much about it, for he greatly admired what he saw when he visited you and King Danner at your wedding."

"Yes, I recall meeting your honored father. It is to my everlasting sadness that my dear King Danner did not live long after our wedding." Queen Ruby rested a hand over her heart, though her expression was not affected.

Yes, I imagine you were very sad, Phillip thought. Aloud, he said, "It was a great loss when he died. However, we must have hope for the future."

Queen Ruby's blood red lips curled up in a smile. "Precisely," she said with such false innocence Phillip wondered how it didn't choke her. "Which is why we greet you so gladly."

"Thank you," Phillip said. He glanced around the throne room, taking in the well-dressed courtiers and officials. "If you

will pardon my impertinence, for I already feel at home here, but where is the Princess Snow?"

The smile on Queen Ruby's face turned brittle. "Yes, the dear Princess Snow." She glanced at a well-dressed servant who bowed to her and ducked out of the room. "I imagine she will be along soon." She stood and glided closer to Phillip, a cat-like smile of satisfaction on her lips. "I will gladly introduce you to my step-daughter, though I hope she does not bore you, as she has not yet reached her majority and can be quite silly."

Her age is precisely why I wish to see her, Phillip thought. It has only been sheer luck that no other princes or noble sir has swooped in and scooped her up—or attempted to court Queen Ruby. Amberly was ripe for the taking, and Phillip would do whatever was necessary to see that it became Warrend's.

"If she is half as charming as you are, I feel I shall enjoy her company," Phillip said.

"You are too charming." Queen Ruby stopped when she was close enough that the hemline of her dress almost brushed Phillip's boots. This close, Phillip could see the queen wore layers of makeup on her eyes, lips, and cheeks. *Probably to hide the signs of aging…perhaps the rumors exaggerated after all.*

There was a scuffle at the back of the room as the double doors were thrown open. In waltzed a young girl with black hair and vacant, hazel eyes. Judging by the silver crown threaded through her hair, she was Princess Snow. However, she looked much younger than fifteen. Between the blue pinafore dress she wore and her large hazel eyes, she could have passed for a 12-year-old.

Snow curtsied prettily. "Greetings step-mother." Her voice made Phillip question what his father had told him. Was Princess Snow really fifteen? Her voice was high-pitched and childish.

When the princess saw him, she yelped and raised a hand to her lips. "Oh, my, a visitor!" She giggled and twirled her dress self-consciously.

“How long do you intend to stay with us?” Queen Ruby asked.

“I should like to stay at least a week, perhaps more—provided I do not become an irritant to you.” Phillip flashed his most engaging smile at the queen and princess.

Queen Ruby’s cat-like smile grew, and she placed a hand on his forearm. “Come now, you could never be an irritant.”

“We will have so much fun!” Princess Snow giggled. “We can go riding and sing together, and I can take you to the woods near the castle!”

“That sounds delightful,” Phillip said. *Perhaps, since Father has seen her, Princess Snow has become ill in the head? Or perhaps she really is younger than I was told.*

Queen Ruby glanced away and pressed her lips together in disdain. “Snow, do not be so droll. It is most unattractive. Now run along.”

Princess Snow stamped a foot. “But step-mother! Prince Filly only just arrived!”

An emotion twitched across Queen Ruby’s face, but it left too swiftly for Phillip to identify it.

“It’s Phillip,” Phillip said as pleasantly as he could.

“Yes,” Queen Ruby said. “But you will see plenty of him this evening when I throw a banquet in Prince Phillip’s honor. Now, leave us.”

Princess Snow sighed and dropped her chin almost to her chest as she walked away, stomping from the throne room.

Phillip watched her go. *Yes, Father must have mistaken her age.*

“I hope you do not think my decision to throw you a party is high-handed,” Queen Ruby said.

Phillip renewed his smile. “Of course not! I should be very glad to attend any event in which you grace us with your presence.”

Queen Ruby laughed. Phillip imagined she meant for it to be a sultry chuckle, but she sounded more like a cackling crow.

Phillip kept his smile in place in spite of the horrid laugh, clenching his teeth so tightly together they almost cracked.

It seems the task Father has given me will be more difficult than I thought.

THE BANQUET WAS A BIZARRE ORDEAL. That is to say, the banquet itself was adequate, but Queen Ruby and Princess Snow continued to act strangely.

The party was held in a grand dining hall. The walls were beveled with gold; the flooring was beautifully patterned marble; and rich fabrics and beautiful paintings adorned the walls. Mountains of succulent and rare foods were piled on the table. There was everything from lobster to roasted peacock to sweet fruits, puffy puddings, and more.

It was most definitely a display of Amberly's wealth and status as a port country. An army of servants saw to the food, and the nobles of Amberly were present, dressed in luxurious fabrics and sparkling with costly gems and metals.

But while the food, room, servants, and even courtiers garnered Phillip's admiration, the queen and princess tarnished the effect.

Queen Ruby wore another red silk dress; however, while her morning dress was tasteful, her evening dress was gaudy. It was stiff with ornate gold embroidery, and the skirts were so voluminous it puffed around her like a mushroom. She wore an oversized gold crown, and had so many strings of rubies woven into her hair, Phillip wondered how she could keep her head up.

Princess Snow wore another painfully childish white pinafore, went barefoot, and spent much of the night zooming around with wide eyes and her mouth open with childish wonder. On a couple of occasions, she even broke out in a song

—until Queen Ruby snapped at her and ordered her to silence herself.

I no longer wonder why no other country has yet attempted to woo Princess Snow. She is quite young and a little odd. However, it would still behoove me to please both the princess and the queen in hopes that I might eventually marry the princess.

Phillip was pulled from his musings when Queen Ruby approached him, wearing her cat-like smile. “My dear Prince Phillip, I hope you are enjoying this little get together.”

“I feel most welcomed.” Phillip bowed over her hand when she offered it. “Though it alarms me you would call such a marvelous banquet little.”

Queen Ruby cackle-laughed. “Oh, I know we could never hope to match the splendor of your Warrend. Though, I did try.”

She seems in a festive mood. Now would be my best opportunity to feel out if Princess Snow’s has other swains or to see if Queen Ruby herself is open to matrimony. “It is surprising to me that a woman as beautiful and lovely as yourself—and such a good and welcoming hostess— is not relentlessly pursued by lovelorn bucks.” He smiled.

Queen Ruby pressed a hand to her heart and tried to shift her makeup-caked features into an unconvincing expression of sadness. “Your words are so kind; however, all my subjects know my heart will never be whole due to King Danner’s untimely death.”

Phillip smiled falsely. “Yes, I’m sure. It pains me to ask this, but please remind me how the good King Danner passed?”

Queen Ruby wiped an imaginary tear from her eye. “In his sleep. None of our physicians or healers were able to discern the cause of it.”

“How unfortunate,” Phillip said. *And how providential for you. Perhaps it would be best for my health if I did not pursue Queen Ruby.*

Princess Snow twirled past, almost knocking into Queen Ruby.

“Snow.” Queen Ruby’s voice was harsh. “Do watch where you’re going, you clumsy thing.”

Princess Snow staggered two steps before she righted herself and giggled. “Sorry, step-mother. I am just having so much fun! Oh, Prince Filly! Won’t you join me in singing a duet later?”

Choosing to ignore the irritating nickname, he asked, “A duet?”

“Yes, I adore singing.” Princess Snow nodded sagely. “Especially in public.”

“I see,” Phillip said. “I’m afraid I’m not one for singing.”

Princess Snow’s lower lip jutted out in a pout. “But it is such fun! Won’t you join me, *please*!”

It physically hurt Phillip to keep his smile in place and his teeth showing. By the trembling of Queen Ruby’s lips, Phillip guessed she was glad that Snow was bothering Phillip and not her.

The queen looked away and coughed oddly.

I’m not going to sing with this ill-mannered brat, even if I must court her. “I am afraid I must refuse, though I should love to listen to you sing.”

A short, skinny stick of a man scurried towards Queen Ruby like a frightened mouse. “Your Majesty,” he squeaked.

“What is it, Douglas?” Queen Ruby asked.

The man cast Phillip a nervous look and wriggled in place. “It is nothing. Just a trifling worry, but…”

Queen Ruby rolled her eyes. “Yes?”

The man wrung his hands, and leaned closer to Queen Ruby. He whispered to her, but either the queen was partially deaf or they thought Phillip was, for it was barely softer than a normal speaking voice. “Is it really wise to throw such an expensive party?”

Queen Ruby stiffened, then shuffled slightly, making the little man hop sideways. “What?”

The man hunched his shoulders to his chin, and lowered his voice even further—though it didn’t matter, for the new angle he stood at made it even easier for Phillip to hear him. “We are

already in debt. I don't know how you will pay the servants this quarter, and yet you throw this—"

"You dare to tell me what to do?" Queen Ruby's voice was dark and dangerous.

"No," the man squeaked.

"Then you are questioning me!"

"No, never!" The man feebly protested.

Queen Ruby's blue eyes flashed. She glanced at Phillip, and smiled like a snake. "If you'll excuse me, Phillip, step-daughter." She hissed at the skinny man, "Come," and swept away, the little man hopping after her.

Princess Snow watched her go with a roughish grin—which made her look much older.

There is something strange about this…why would they discuss such delicate topics in public? Though perhaps it is merely that Queen Ruby is that poor of a monarch. "Who was that?" Phillip asked.

Princess Snow's smile was gone, and she was once again all wide-eyes and childish pouts as she tugged on her pinafore. "That's Douglas, the treasurer. He has become such a worrier since step-mother became queen."

"I see…" Phillip rubbed his chin.

Perhaps Amberly is not as rich as Father's spies reported. It makes no matter. If I marry Snow and become king, I can raise the import and export taxes. Even if the country is heavily indebted, it is still a rich trading center.

Princess Snow grabbed Phillip's hands. "Come, now we can sing together."

Phillip forced his lips into a smile as he let her pull him along. "I've already said, my dear princess, that I cannot. Though I would gladly listen to you."

"Nonsense, everyone can sing!"

Phillip grimaced at her back. *I certainly hope Father appreciates the obstacles I am facing to procure our trading center…*

Two days later, Phillip strode down the hallway searching for Queen Ruby. Since the banquet, he had focused on wooing Princess Snow. Thus far, it had not been an enjoyable experience. Snow insisted upon singing and even made Phillip perform a play with her and assigned him the role of a king's fool—Queen Ruby happened to be passing by at the time and laughed heartily. All of Snow's childish antics were starting to make him reconsider his plan to marry her.

Wooing Snow is only my secondary goal. For now I must seek out proof that Amberly is in dire financial straits.

He suspected Queen Ruby would be the most knowledgeable—and the most likely to mention it—so for the day, he would concentrate on charming her.

Phillip paused outside the throne room, ignoring the guards stationed at the door. Through the cracked door, he could hear Queen Ruby murmur, "Mirror, mirror on the wall. Who is the fairest of them all?" Confused, Phillip cracked the door and peered inside.

Queen Ruby was alone in the throne room. She stood in front of a giant mirror that hung on the wall behind her throne. She looked very different than when Phillip first saw her. Today, she wore a black dress, and her curly hair was wild—almost ratty.

To whom is she speaking? Phillip cleared his throat and opened the door, loudly taking two steps in to the room. "Ah, Queen Ruby! I have long been searching for you."

Queen Ruby ignored Phillip and curled her hands into fists. "Snow? Snow is the fairest of them all?"

"I beg your pardon?" Phillip said.

“It cannot be. Once more: Mirror, mirror on the wall. Who is the fairest of them all?”

Phillip took a few more steps in. Did she not hear him? “Queen Ruby?”

Queen Ruby gasped, as if the mirror had replied to her mad babblings. She squeezed her fists so tightly they shook, and when she whirled around, her face was red and pinched with rage. “Guards! Find Princess Snow, and bring her to me!”

Phillip heard the guards in the corridors move. He cast a cautious glance around the room and moved to put his back to a wall. *Is she really this mad? Or perhaps she has unknown dark arts?* “Queen Ruby, please, tell me what is wrong.”

The enraged queen spared him a glance that effectively silenced him. Her gaze was poisonous with her anger.

Faster than Phillip thought possible, the guards arrived. Two took up a post outside the doors, but four of them led Princess Snow inside.

Queen Ruby smiled frighteningly as she drew closer to Princess Snow. “Snow, my dearest step-daughter. How lovely you look today.”

“Why, thank you, step-mother.” Snow batted her eyelashes.

Phillip gaped at her. *Can’t the fool girl see her step-mother is in a fit?*

“You are so lovely, in fact,” Queen Ruby said as she patted Princess Snow’s cheek. “I believe you will soon surpass my own beauty.”

“Soon? Hasn’t that time already come?” Princess Snow asked sweetly.

Queen Ruby screamed in anger and grabbed Snow by the hair. “You wretched child!”

Phillip was shocked the queen dared to lay a hand on Princess Snow in front of him, but he was even more shocked when Princess Snow shrieked like an angry bird and clawed at Queen Ruby.

They scuffled for a moment, then paused. Queen Ruby’s eyebrows flicked up, and her eyes flicked in Phillip’s direction.

Princess Snow raised her chin. “I cannot wait until I inherit everything and throw you into the streets!”

Phillip rubbed his chin in consideration. *If they both are mad, I could marry Snow and have them both locked up…*

Queen Ruby laughed harshly. “You think there is anything left to inherit? The treasury is empty! We are so heavily in debt, no one will lend us any funds. For the past month, we have been forced to give away exportation rights!”

Phillip jolted to attention. *They are giving away harbor rights? They are so heavily in debt they can’t even collect taxes from neighboring countries anymore?*

“I care not for money,” Snow said. “I will make all the people of Amberly sing and dance until we all drop dead!”

“You may be fairest,” Queen Ruby hissed. “But you are also the stupidest!”

“At least I am not a dried up old woman, chasing after beauty she has not had in years!” Princess Snow said.

“You will ruin this country!” Queen Ruby shouted.

“It is too late for that! You have already bled it dry!” Princess Snow declared.

Queen Ruby slapped Princess Snow. “Guards, take Princess Snow to the dungeons!”

“No!” Princess Snow screamed. “You cannot do this! Prince Phillip will serve as my champion!”

As Queen Ruby laughed, Phillip judged that perhaps it was time for him to leave. *Father will be disappointed, but there is nothing for us in Amberly. If they don’t own the rights to their harbor anymore, they are useless as a shipping point.*

Quietly, Prince Phillip of Warrend slipped from the room. *I will leave now and send my valet back for my belongings, for it would not do to be dragged into Queen Ruby’s and Princess Snow’s argument. The less we deal with Amberly, the better.*

Feeling relieved, Phillip hurried through the castle, making for the stables. *Perhaps this is turning out for the best. I do not think marriage to either Queen Ruby or Princess Snow would have been even remotely enjoyable, for their terrible manners*

would make them impossible to put off without locking up somewhere. Yes, it is for the best I found out all about Amberly's true state.

"Is he gone?" Queen Ruby asked.

One of the guards standing outside the door to the throne room stuck his head inside. "We just received confirmation from the stables. Prince Phillip has left the castle and is leaving Amberly."

Queen Ruby sighed so deeply, her shoulders sagged. "Finally! He had more perseverance than the last three men we've run off."

Princess Snow drew a white handkerchief from her ridiculous pinafore and offered it to her step-mother. "I was beginning to think we would be forced to do something more drastic."

Queen Ruby took the handkerchief and started to wipe off the layers of carefully applied makeup. "More drastic? What performance could we possibly put on that would be even more drastic?"

"I was thinking you could pretend to try and kill me. Oh! Or we can have a huntsman chase me to the forest!"

"I don't believe such a farce would be possible. I have more trouble remaining in character—so to speak—than you do." Queen Ruby scrubbed at her face with the handkerchief. "I wish you would apply this much passion to your studies. You have much to learn before your coronation."

Princess Snow wrinkled her nose. "Must I? Why can't you continue to be the ruler?"

"Because I am only your regent, and I have no desire whatsoever to remain a queen. You will take your position, even if I have to tie you to the throne myself," Queen Ruby threatened. She finished wiping off the last of her makeup,

revealing a remarkably young complexion. “I didn’t sign up for any of this.”

Princess Snow leaned in so her shoulder brushed Ruby’s. “I know; I’m sorry. I appreciate everything you’ve done for me, Ruby.”

Queen Ruby and King Danner had been a rather surprising love match. Ruby was barely ten years older than Snow and was only a miller’s daughter. But since Snow first saw the two of them together, she knew her father adored Ruby, and Ruby her father. It broke Ruby’s heart when King Danner had died, but she carried on for Snow’s sake, guarding and protecting the daughter and kingdom King Danner had loved.

Together, Queen Ruby and Princess Snow had driven off every eligible male who dared to drop in on Amberly in hopes of wooing one of them and gaining control of the country.

Queen Ruby embraced Princess Snow, patting her back as if she were a fretting child. “We’ll survive. Even if I have to act like a crazed woman until I’m shriveled and old, I’ll stay with you. You’ll see; Amberly will thrive under your leadership. And after you’ve had time to establish yourself as queen, we’ll find you a wonderful prince who will make you very happy.”

Snow smiled and threw her arms around her step-mother. “I don’t know…. Perhaps I won’t marry a prince. Perhaps it was not just my father, but the entire royal family of Amberly who has a soft spot for millers.” She winked.

Queen Ruby groaned. “All your sassing will send me to an early grave.”

“Never!” Snow laughed.

“It will.” Queen Ruby said firmly. “Now let’s go wash up. We’re meeting with Douglas after lunch—he wants to discuss expanding the treasury.”

“Can’t you handle the money?”

“Snow.”

“Yes, step-mother.” Snow linked her arm with Queen Ruby, and together the pair glided towards the door, smiling at the guards as they passed them.

The guards watched them with open affection, happy for the two women who had once again saved their country.

THE END

BEFORE THE BOND

A RED ROPE OF FATE SHORT

This short story is set centuries before the events of Red Rope of Fate and gives you a glimpse of how the humans of Calnor and the Lesser Elves of Lessa became allies.

The High Elves were gone. Galas, King of the Lesser Elves, both rejoiced and despaired over this.

The High Elves were powerful…and confrontational. In all of their history, there was rarely a decade in which they did not declare war on another country or were involved in some kind of assault or dispute.

The Lesser Elves were much more peace-loving. Lacking their cousins' ferocity, they were poor warriors but excelled in the arts.

Unfortunately, the High Elves' war-mongering ways had garnered the hatred of all humans. So, when the High Elves left the Continent on ships, intending to sail across the sea and search for new lands, the Lesser Elves—all of whom stayed behind, knowing they did not have the stamina and vigor necessary to survive the voyage—were left in a land full of humans that had been waiting for centuries to pay back the elves for all the damage they had caused.

King Galas paced back and forth in the palace library. "Have the last of the refugees arrived, Ringali?"

His cousin leaned against a cherry-wood table and studied a detailed map of the country. “They have, for all the good it will do them.”

Galas had consolidated his once-sprawling people back to a tiny patch of land that he had renamed Lessa. Sandwiched between three human countries, filled with rich, fertile lands, and bordering the ocean, Lessa had once been a high-elf territory. Now, it seemed it would become the graveyard of all Lesser Elves.

Just that morning, Ringali had brought him grim news. The men of the southern countries were gathering armies and forces at the borders. Lessa’s army was minuscule, and the soldiers were not as cunning as High Elves, nor as ruthless as humans. They would be slaughtered.

Galas pinched his eyes shut. “Do you think we could send an ambassador…?”

Ringali shrugged. “You could, though it will likely be a death sentence for whomever you choose.”

Galas stopped pacing and paused in front of a window. “Although I am not one for anger, I find it hard not to be enraged with our powerful cousins. It is unjust that they sailed off—and left us to deal with the consequences of the blood they shed.” He stared out at the beautiful, flowering gardens that surrounded the palace, and his heart ached.

“You could’ve gone with them,” Ringali said. He sauntered away from the table and joined Galas in front of the window. “You have enough High Elf blood in you that you could’ve survived. They would’ve welcomed you.”

Galas and most of his family were at least half-blooded High Elves. Lesser Elves, a much less populated race than High Elves or humans, were the offspring of High Elves and humans.

Galas glanced at his cousin. “They would’ve welcomed you, as well. But no. I stayed for the same reason you stayed. I could not abandon my people to the slaughter that awaited them.”

Ringali slapped him on the shoulder. “You can’t lose hope.”

Galas sighed again. “No, but it is hard to look for the light when one is faced with complete annihilation.”

“My King Galas—” Ringali started.

They were interrupted by pounding on the door.

“Enter,” Galas said.

The door was thrown open, and a young Lesser Elf spattered with mud and dust burst into the library. “My King Galas, honored Ringali, I bear great news!”

Galas’ heart squeezed. *Please, please be a miracle.* “Yes?”

“Queen Alannah of Calnor wishes to forge an alliance with you, with Lessa!”

Galas blinked. *Calnor, the human country to the west… But why? Is Queen Alannah trying to beat out the southern countries and offer us a bloodless take over?* “What kind of alliance?”

The messenger handed Galas a scroll that contained, in badly written Elvish, an offer of peace and friendship, and a desire to meet with Galas.

Ringali, reading over Galas’ shoulder, raised his eyebrows. “This Queen Alannah seeks our friendship and asks for nothing in return? Though it sorrows my soul to be suspicious, I cannot believe any country on the Continent would offer us help.”

Galas placed the scroll on the table, spreading it out over the map. He ran a finger across the shaky handwriting. “She’s offering to aid us against a southern invasion.”

“Does she plan to bring her troops into Lessa?” Ringali asked.

Galas studied the scroll. “It does not say. She asks that we would meet her at Bennic, that small city in Calnor close to our border.”

Ringali’s eyes crinkled with concern. “Do you think it is a trick?”

Galas looked up from the scroll. “It may very well be, but I cannot refuse. There is a chance, however small, that this could lead to our survival.”

Ringali nodded. “I agree. When do we leave?”

Galas straightened his shoulders. “As quickly as we can.”

Queen Alannah was more prepared than Galas thought she would be. They met, as she requested, in Bennic. She had brought with her a squad of soldiers who camped west of the city and were armed to the teeth.

She arrived in a carriage, disembarked with a smile, and curtsied deeply when she set eyes on Galas, Ringali, and the other elves they had brought as a retinue. She was surprisingly petite, had a button nose dusted with a smattering of freckles, and bright green eyes that were large with curiosity.

Two humans were her constant companions. Both of them had an intermediate understanding of Elvish—it was they who had written the scroll. They served as the translators—making Galas wish some of his people knew even a little Calnoric.

“Welcome, King Galas of Lessa,” one of the translators said, repeating Queen Alannah’s words in Elvish. His accent was so thick Galas’ could barely discern his words. “Queen Alannah is glad you agreed to meet her here.”

Galas bowed. “It is our honor.”

Queen Alannah spoke, and the translator said, “The queen invited you here because it is her hope that we can forge an alliance.”

“What are your terms?” Galas asked.

Queen Alannah tilted her head as she spoke.

“Terms?” The translator asked on her behalf.

“Yes,” Galas said. “What are your stipulations?”

One of the translators explained Galas’ words to the queen.

The queen furrowed her eyebrows and spoke.

“The queen has never heard of an offer of friendship that requires stipulations,” a translator said.

“Is that what this is?” Ringali asked, taking a step towards the Calnor Queen. “You have nothing you desire from us?” His

eyes glittered, revealing his High Elf heritage.

The Queen of Calnor wrinkled her nose and spoke in the guttural language of humans.

“The queen wishes to extend an invitation for Calnor to stand as your protector. She is aware of the armies gathering at your southern borders and offers to fight them—in human lands, not in Lessa—on your behalf.”

“Why?” Galas’ voice was harsher than he meant for it to be.

There was a pause as the translator spoke with the queen. “The Queen is knowledgeable of the Lesser Elves’ fighting skills. She believes men of Calnor would suffer fewer losses if they were to march to battle rather than Lessa’s forces.”

That is a pretty way of saying she knows we can’t fight. Galas rubbed his chin and exchanged glances with Ringali. “What would Calnor ask for in return for their aid?” he asked.

Queen Alannah scratched her nose as she listened to the translator and chirped back at him.

“Nothing. Queen Alannah says it would be a sign of your friendship.”

She must wish for something. No ruler, no being would help others without expecting something in return. Galas considered his thoughts and tried to organize them into a polite question; however, his cousin beat him to it.

Ringali narrowed his eyes and stared down at Queen Alannah. “Why would you sacrifice your own men on our behalf if there is truly nothing you wish for in retribution?”

The translator and the queen went back and forth for a number of minutes, until the queen whacked him on the arm. The translator scowled but turned back to Galas and his retinue. “The queen wishes that I say exactly what she says.”

Galas again exchanged looks with Ringali and nodded.

The response surprised them both.

“Because I have eyes in my head,” Queen Alannah said via a translator. “Because I know it was not you who caused the bloodshed on this continent, but the High Elves. Because I know the Lesser Elves are a gentle, peacekeeping race who do not

deserve the hatred that is about to be poured out upon them. And lastly, because some men and women really do act with honor and compassion, and I happen to rule over a country of them."

Galas gaped at the small human queen. She impishly grinned up at him, dwarfed by his height.

Galas murmured into Ringali's ear. "Do you think her words are true?"

Ringali shrewdly studied the Queen. "I think she believes her words to be true, but I'm not certain the rest of Calnor would agree with her." He met Galas' eyes. "I feel duty bound to tell you that this may be a cunningly cloaked trap, but it might also be the miracle we badly need."

"It is a risk," Galas admitted. "And it feels wrong to ask them to make such a sacrifice… But I know of no other way to save us."

Ringali nodded. Galas glanced at the other elf officials who had come with them. They murmured as they spoke to one another, but those nearest to them nodded in agreement.

I hope I do not live to regret this. Galas pushed his shoulders back and set his eyes upon the Queen of Calnor. "I thank you for your gracious offer. It is my sorrow we cannot offer the same support to you; however, I do thankfully accept your offer of friendship." Galas approached the queen and took her small hands in his. He bent over, stooping until his forehead touched the tops of her hands. "The compassion and noble character of your people will long be remembered by the elves of Lessa."

When the translator stopped talking, Queen Alannah tugged his hands up, nudging him back into his upright position. He straightened and met her gaze, surprised by the bright and cheerful smile on her face. Her button nose crinkled, and her green eyes glowed as she said, in mangled Elvish, "Friends?"

In that moment, Galas finally understood why the High Elves, normally violently opposed to the humans, had so passionately loved some that they sired the race of Lesser Elves. Queen Alannah—small, fully human, and quite

underwhelming, was made breathtakingly beautiful with her smile and staunch character.

This is not a trick, Galas dimly realized. *She really wishes for this alliance. And if that is so, I will do everything in my power to bring our two countries closer together.*

Queen Alannah tugged her hands from Galas' and chattered away, addressing her comments to Galas as if he could understand, as she gestured at a scroll the translators wrestled with. It was probably an agreement they were meant to sign.

"Ringali," Galas said.

"My King?"

"I wish for you to return to the palace with Enchanter Vasilla and begin a search for elves who could learn Calnoric."

"You are uncomfortable that you cannot understand them?" Ringali guessed.

Galas shook his head. "Not at all. It is only that we cannot expect Calnor to bear all the weight of this friendship. We also must try to reach out to them."

Ringali nodded. "Indeed… Perhaps magic could help us better communicate."

"Research it," Galas said.

Ringali bowed. "It is my joy to do as My King commands."

It is my joy, Galas internally agreed, *that we Lesser Elves have underestimated the character of humans. And it is my hope that our friendship will forge a brighter future.*

IT WOULD HAVE SHOCKED and saddened Galas to learn that it would take centuries before the communication gap between Lessa and Calnor would be breached. It would not have surprised him, however, to learn that the gap was bridged due to the love found between a human and an elf.

THE END

TRIALS OF A FIRST KNIGHT

A HALL OF BLOOD AND MERCY SHORT

Celestina Drake would do anything for Killian Drake, Elder of the Drake Vampire Family, and the top vampire in the Midwest.

As his First Knight she'd been there when he fought his way up the political chain, had waged war on his behalf, and guarded his back when magical society had opted to go public with their existence to the humans.

She would stand with him through pain, bloodshed, and death…which might come soon if something didn't change.

Celestina calmly picked up the fancy ball point pen she'd never had a chance to use before and carefully wrote on a piece of thick, creamy paper.

The Last Will and Testament of Celestina Drake

"That seems a bit drastic, First Knight." Gavino, one of the lower ranked members of the Drake Family craned his neck as he read the paper upside down. "It seems more like something the Second Knight would write."

Celestina tapped the table with a nail, frowning when she realized it was chipped. "It is a precautionary measure."

"Surely you don't think a fae would ever be skilled enough to take you down?" Gavino asked.

"Not at all," Celestina calmly said. "Rather, I am afraid I will die from sheer exhaustion."

Gavino grimaced and rubbed his eyes. “Yeah, His Eminence has extended our training hours again.”

The training wasn’t the only problem. Celestina rather liked training—it gave her a chance to push and improve herself on anything from martial arts to her swordsmanship. No, it was the intense and long hours of training matched with attending every political meeting and worse—every party in magical society that had even the faintest whiff of political undertones.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s a brunch hosted by werewolves in Wisconsin or an evening tea with the wizards in Minnesota, he goes to *everything*,” Celestina growled under her breath.

Gavino winced. “Ah, yeah, as his First Knight you have to go to all the political stuff. I get by with rotational patrols.”

Celestina forcibly withdrew herself from her own exhaustion and smiled at Gavino. “How have they been going?”

“I only had a twenty-four hour one two days ago!” Gavino said brightly. “I was just tailing a local alpha, too, so I actually got a chance to rest last night!”

“Why were you tailing an alpha? Did he show suspicious behavior?” Celestina asked.

“Nah.” Gavino shook his head. “His Eminence said he just wanted to collect information on him in case he ever needed to coerce the local werewolf packs for anything.” He paused. “Do you know if the Eminence has slept at all today? He was up when I returned from patrol last night, and Julianne said he’d already been awake for two days straight between his own training, committee meetings, and political socials.”

Celestina clutched her pen so tightly it cracked.

She respected Killian Drake. She admired him, trusted him implicitly, and she believed with all her heart he was the best chance the vampires had to avoid being wiped out given his manipulations, his active role in politics, and the vampire Family he’d raised to become one of the best fighting units in America.

And the only thing holding her back from trying to put him in a chokehold until he passed out was the knowledge that it

would never work because he was so much more powerful than her.

Can't he just get a hobby? Maybe pick up gardening, or movie watching? Something that would just give us all the chance to breathe for a few hours a week!

Vampires were on the verge of losing their spot as one of the top beings in magical society because too many of the elder vampires had grown complacent and bored with their long lives. They didn't care about the outside world, and longed for eras and times long gone.

Killian Drake had embattled himself in a ruthless fight to maintain their dominance. He was a hero to the vampires who understood what was going on.

But Celestina was starting to fear that in his effort to stay on top of everything and to bend the region to his will, he would burn out…and vampire society would crumble without him.

"We need something to help His Eminence relieve his stress," Celestina announced.

"What, you mean, get him a puppy or something?" Gavino asked.

Celestina set her cracked pen on the table. "I don't know that a pet would be the best choice."

"Yeah," Gavino agreed. "I can't really see him snuggling with a dog or cat. Maybe we could convince him meditation is key to new training breakthroughs?"

"That seems more plausible," Celestina said. "I'll discuss it with the Second Knight. Though I wish we had an alternative that was, perhaps, more time consuming or brought about a different emotion than self-discipline, which His Eminence already has in excess."

Gavino shivered in fright. "If you really wish to give His Eminence the opportunity to relax, we could offer to enter training matches with him."

Celestina barely held her own shudder in check. She remembered the last time Killian had let loose during a fight. It was awe-inspiring, and terrifying. "No," she said. "It is for the

best if His Eminence trains alone. We'll merely have to keep our eyes open for new opportunities and hope something comes along soon."

Gavino bowed. "As you say, First Knight!"

Celestina nodded to the lower ranked vampire, and glanced at her "will."

I hope something comes soon. Not just for our sake, but his as well.

It took all the decades of Celestina's training to keep the smile on her face slight instead of letting it morph into an idiotic grin as she watched Killian Drake and the newest member of Drake Hall, Hazel Medeis.

"Drop me off a patio—see if I ever stand near you again!" Hazel grumbled under her breath, her lips pursed and her button nose wrinkled.

Killian openly grinned as he strolled behind her. "Won't you join me for a stroll, Wizard?"

"I'm not getting within ten feet of you!" Hazel squawked. "You stay back there!" She swung around so she could jab a finger in his direction.

"I can hardly toss you from great heights if we're in the gardens."

"No, but you probably have killer bees!"

"No, but that's not a half bad idea…"

Hazel bulged her eyes. "You're the worst!"

"Thank you."

"I said stay back!"

Killian chuckled as he ruffled Hazel's hair. She barked at him like one of those tiny purse dogs some humans owned.

Celestina cleared her throat to cover her snort, and glanced at Gavino. "It seems I was wrong. His Eminence did need a pet, and is a very attentive owner."

Gavino scratched his jaw. “Yeah, I don’t know about that, First Knight.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I’m starting to think that maybe he needed a companion.”

Celestina laughed. “A companion? Not likely. We’ve been with him for decades—some of us for centuries. He has never claimed companionship.”

Gavino shrugged. “You’re right, but…”

Celestina gave the bigger vampire a friendly slap on the shoulder and pretended not to notice when he staggered as a result. “You second-guess yourself, Gavino. You were right—Killian needed a distraction in the form of a pet.”

She smiled at Gavino, then hurried to catch up with Killian (who was still laughing) and Hazel (who was still irate).

A companion? No. Killian has no desire for that—he abhors such things.

She watched Hazel try to storm off before Killian grabbed her by the wrist and tugged her back so she bounced into his side.

Besides, I could never be wrong about this twice…could I?

The End

You can read more about Celestina, Gavino, and their friends in Magic Forged. Out now!

THE PRINCESS WHO CHASED SHEEP

A SHORT STORY

Princess Colette was known throughout her father's kingdom for being clever. For any other girl, it would have been considered praise. Unfortunately for Colette, her lot in life was to marry in order to further her father's kingdom, and cleverness was not often listed as a trait found desirable by most princes. So instead, Colette's cleverness was viewed as an oddity. More often than not she was misunderstood by those around her.

Colette knew this, and often compensated by keeping her cleverness to herself, but sometimes she just couldn't keep her mouth shut. Such was the case when her father approached her and her older sister, Princess Arianna, as they were taking their tea in the garden.

"Father! What a pleasant surprise. Come, sit with us and have some tea." Princess Arianna smiled—which turned her beautiful face downright dazzling—and motioned for their father to take a seat in an empty wicker chair.

King Louis lowered himself into the chair with a groan and rubbed the dark circles under his eyes. "Good afternoon girls," he said.

Colette shut the book she had been paging through and set it aside. "What's wrong, Father?"

"Politics, land rights, military campaigns, the usual. You girls wouldn't understand." King Louis leaned back in his chair and

stared at the sky. An orange butterfly almost landed on his nose.

Princess Arianna poured a cup of tea and placed the teacup in front of their father with the elegance of a dancer. “Military campaigns? Has someone declared war against us?”

“No.” King Louis swatted the butterfly away. “Though I fear they may soon. That hairy, bloated, King Gunther of the north and his prancing prat of a son have been making inroads towards our sweet lands. If they set their eyes upon my throne, we are finished.”

Colette picked at her nails, stopping guiltily when her father eyed her hands. “I thought King Gunther had finished his military campaigns,” she said.

King Louis considered his teacup. “He claims he has. Though now his son is of marriageable age, I imagine he’ll try to expand his empire through marriage. May the heavens preserve those poor countries around them.”

“Oh dear,” Arianna murmured.

King Louis leaned across the tiny tea table and patted his older daughter’s hand. “Fear not my sweet. Perhaps nothing will come of it.”

“I do hope so,” Arianna said. “But if marriage is all it takes to put off a war, I will—”

“Nonsense. I would never willingly let that hairy king or any of his offspring spirit you north.” King Louis’ hand drifted to the sword strapped to his waist.

Arianna glanced worriedly at Colette, who took the unspoken hint. “Be that as it may, technically speaking it would be far wiser for King Gunther to request a daughter from the ruler of one of his neighboring lands. As we don’t share a border, I don’t believe Arianna or I would be a target,” she said.

King Louis’ stately brow glistened in the morning sun. “Yes, possibly. But enough of such dark topics. I’ve discussed the issue endlessly with your mother and my advisors, and I tire of it. Instead I find myself longing for proof of love and light. Tell me, how much do you love me?”

Arianna laughed, a beautiful noise that Colette privately suspected made songbirds jealous. “Father, surely you must know that you are the apple of my eye!”

“Arianna, my darling, you are a father’s dream!” King Louis laughed and clasped Arianna’s hands. “You always bring such delight to me. I am so blessed to call you my daughter.”

Colette considered returning to her book—for her father frequently cooed over Arianna for hours at a time—but sweet Arianna shook her head. “But Father, what about Colette?”

King Louis tilted his head and smiled first at Arianna and then at Colette. “What of Colette?”

Arianna—kind and thoughtful at all times, even moments Colette wished she wasn’t—raised her chin. “Why don’t you ask Colette how much she loves you as well?”

“Ah, yes! Very well, tell me, Colette, how much do you love me?”

Though King Louis smiled and his voice was warm, the lack of endearment stung Colette, and her usual control buckled. She couldn’t stop herself, and said, “Why, Father, I love you as much as I love the salt that seasons my food.”

King Louis’ smile turned into a frown. “You compare me to a seasoning?”

Slightly peeved with his reaction, Colette pointed out, “Arianna compared you to a fruit, and I meant it as a compliment.”

Arianna glanced back and forth between Colette and King Louis. “Father, have you tried the date bread yet? It is quite delicious. Here, let me get you a piece.” The tea set clanked as she piled tea treats on a plate and placed it in front of King Louis.

King Louis held up his hand, forestalling her distraction. “A compliment? Is it not one of your *clever* backhanded retorts?”

Colette sighed. *I should have known better. He is tired, and his worries shorten his temper so he does not even pretend to understand my words.* “I meant it sincerely, but if the comparison troubles you, I will gladly rephrase it.”

“No. Too many times you have used tricky words, and I have refrained from punishing you due to your mother’s insistence and your sister’s begging. Today I will not tolerate your cheek. For one year, I will banish you from this palace.”

Colette stared at him, stunned. *He cannot be serious.*

A slight breeze rustled the delicate garden flowers, filling the air with their sweet fragrance.

Arianna gasped. “Father, you can’t possibly mean that!”

“I do,” King Louis declared. “For one year, you are not allowed to set foot in this Castle. You may take no animals or carriages with you when you depart. When you return, I hope you will have learned proper humility and gentleness!” King Louis stood and strode from the garden, his face creased with a storm cloud of fury.

Arianna clung to her chair. “Take heart, sister, it is only because King Gunther has upset him so! Let me talk to him; let our mother talk to him! Surely he would not declare this if he was not so aggravated.”

Colette curled her hands into fists, and something in her snapped. Too long she had bridled herself, yet she was still held in displeasure. Too long she had tried being the kind of daughter King Louis wanted, and he still judged her a failure. *Enough! I will do this no more!* “No.”

Arianna blinked. “No?”

The elegant stack of cucumber sandwiches piled on a china plate collapsed when Colette bumped the table as she stood. “No. I will not wait for our mother to talk him out of this. I will not wait for you to beg on my behalf. I will do as he orders, and I will leave this place.”

“Sister, I know he has hurt your feelings, but be reasonable! Where will you—oh! Unless, do you mean to stay with a friend?”

“No.” Colette made her way towards the castle, already mentally packing the few belongings she would be able to carry.

“*No*?” Arianna glided after her, her eyes wide with disbelief. “Then what will you do? Where will you go? Oh, Collie!”

Arianna had to be quite upset if she was using her old childhood nickname for Colette.

Unfortunately, Colette was still too angry to notice. “I don’t know. I’ll use my *cleverness* to survive.”

“But how can you…what will you…” Arianna burst into tears—real tears, the ones she shed when she was upset for they made her face red and squished.

Colette paused her determined march and embraced her sister. “I’ll be fine.”

Arianna took in a shaky breath and wiped her face. “You have to tell me when you find a place to stay. It isn’t right, you leaving without any way of sustaining yourself.”

Colette smirked. “That’s not entirely true. Father said I couldn’t take any animals, but he said nothing about my clothing or jewelry.”

Two weeks later, Colette was no longer certain that her plan was quite so clever.

After packing a single dress and a rather hefty load of jewels into a sturdy leather satchel, Colette fled from the palace before her mother could talk any sense into King Louis. Arianna had cried the whole time Colette packed, but she had agreed to keep her silence as long as Colette contacted her when she found a place of employment.

For safety’s sake, before she set out, Colette had swiped a kitchen maid uniform and rubbed dirt and mud all over her face, hands, and every scrap of skin that was seen. The disguise made Arianna cry even harder, but Colette knew a noble young lady on foot was far more likely to be robbed than a scruffy beggar girl.

The farce worked, for Colette had been mostly ignored during her travels. Unfortunately, it seemed that nobody wanted to hire a scruffy beggar girl anymore than they would

want to hire a noble lady. For two weeks, she zigzagged across the countryside looking for employment of any kind. There was none to be found, though often times she was sent off with a crust of bread out of pity.

Perhaps father should stop worrying about King Gunther, and begin worrying about the economic development of our own country.

Colette squinted in the sunlight and scratched her back. A large, magnificent farm spread out in front of her, dotted with cows, goats, and chickens. It was surrounded by fields of growing seedlings. *Might as well try my luck here.* If she didn't find someplace to work soon, she'd have to hawk a piece of jewelry and rent a room at an inn, or admit her pride and seek out living quarters with a friend.

Colette limped her way up the dirt road that led to the farm, her feet aching after days of walking. She tugged on the kerchief that covered her honey-blonde hair and cleared her throat, trying to rid her voice of the road dust that coated it.

A portly farmer wiped his face on a square of cloth and waved to Colette. He (along with a stout woman who was presumably his wife) was in the process of carrying buckets back and forth between a well and a water trough by which two furry donkeys waited. Colette was much encouraged by the size of his girth. A plump farmer meant prosperity!

"Greetings there, girl," the farmer said. "What brings you to our farm?"

Colette adjusted the straps of her leather satchel. "I am seeking employment."

The farmer and his wife stared. "What?" The farmer's wife said.

"Work," Colette hastily corrected her noble accent. She slumped her shoulders and rubbed at her nose with the back of her hand. "Do you need a shepherdess, or a house girl?"

The farmer scratched his beard. "No, we got no need for a house servant."

The farmer's wife pressed her lips together and looked Colette up and down. "But we do have need of a shepherdess. You're a mite little for the job…"

"It won't be a problem!" Colette, eager to seize the opportunity, almost jumped with glee. "I'll work hard and keep your sheep safe—even if I have to fight off wild dogs, or a bear."

The farmer laughed. "We don't got wild dogs in these parts, Missy, but I like your spirit. All you'll have to do is make sure the silly things don't wander off and get lost, or drown themselves if it rains."

Colette clasped her hands so tightly her knuckles turned white. "Then you'll hire me?"

The farmer spit and nodded. "Welcome to the family!" He said warmly. "Come with me, and I'll introduce you to the flock, then I can show you where their pasture lands are."

"Now wait one moment, this girl isn't going anywhere near those beasts. First we ought to take her to the kitchens and see her fed and watered. You look halfway famished, girl." Though the farmer's wife shook her thick finger at Colette, it was impossible to miss the kindness in her eyes.

Colette found it hard to swallow, and her eyes burned with unshed tears. "Thank you," she said.

The farmer's wife curled a plump arm around her shoulders. "Of course, dearie."

COLETTE LEANED AGAINST A TREE TRUNK. Sheep speckled the meadow like puffs of cotton, and the bells that hung from their leather collars created a never-ending song. None of the sheep, she was pleased to see, strayed near the forest. For the two months she had been employed as a shepherdess, barely an hour passed without one of the wooly beasts getting it in their fluffy head to flee into the woods. Colette's least favorite sheep

—the one she called Fat Face—was especially prone towards attempting an escape.

Colette chewed a stem of grass and eyed Fat Face. (Fat Face sported an especially marvelous fleece coat that made its cheeks resemble a chipmunk with a stuffed mouth.) The sheep baaed and batted its eyelashes at her.

Grumbling, Colette hitched her leather satchel up her back—she rarely went anywhere without it—and stomped to the stream that cut through one corner of the meadow. She splashed into the waters and scrubbed at her hands and face with a relieved sigh.

Two months of serving as a shepherdess had been more than enough time to make Colette disenchanted with the simple life. It was hard work, and was more often hot, sweaty, and difficult than rewarding…but she still enjoyed it. The farmer, his wife, and their family had benevolently welcomed Colette into their fold. She had learned how to bake bread, cook, sew, climb trees, correct a lamb's position before they were birthed, ward off broodiness in chickens, keep a house, and more.

"I will be grateful to them for the rest of my life," Colette said with feeling. "But…is there no place I can be *myself*?"

The farmer's family and employees understood her even less than her father and mother. Half of her words left them scratching their heads and squinting down at her—even when Colette was doing her best to sound normal. At least they did not dislike her for her words. The majority of them nodded their heads and said "Is that so, shepherdess?" before changing the topic.

Colette sighed, then abruptly stood, searching for Fat Face. There it was, innocently chewing a dandelion flower. Colette suspiciously eyed the wily sheep as she slid her satchel off her shoulders and sat down again.

She had barely settled into a comfortable position when Fat Face bolted for the forest.

Colette lunged to her feet (with several creative curses involving sheep dung) and gave chase. She splashed into the

stream, hoping to cut the sheep off at the corner, but she stepped on a slick, algae-covered rock and lost her footing, sending her plunging face first into the water. She popped up with a shocked gasp—though it was summer, the water was *cold*—and uttered more curses about sheep as she stumbled, dripping wet, from the water.

Fat Face flicked its tail as it bounded into the trees.

Gritting her teeth, Colette pursued her. Bushes and branches scratched her and yanked at her sopping dress, but she hurried on. Once, she almost caught up with Fat Face, but she got a branch in the face and the sheep surged ahead.

Finally, a patch of clover caught the sheep's attention, and Colette was able to grab the sheep by its leather collar and begin hauling it back to the meadow.

Some of the other sheep looked up with interest when Colette and the wayward Fat Face returned, but when they saw she had no treats for them, they went back to eating. Colette pushed Fat Face to join them, then counted the herd.

"Saints be praised, none left while I was gone." Colette returned to the little stream and picked leaves out of her hair. She frowned down at her dress, which was now ripped at a seam. "I'll have to fix it, but what can I wear in the meantime?"

She cast a dubious look at her leather satchel, which still held a dress and some of her royal jewelry. She didn't fancy putting it on, but she wasn't about to streak around the meadow naked. With her luck, a bunch of the sheep would decide to frolic in the forest at once, and *that* would be an uncomfortable chase.

Working as quickly as she could, Colette jumped behind a bush and changed from her work dress to her costly gown. She pulled her damp hair from the ugly bun she usually kept it in so it could dry in the sunlight, then mended her work dress with the needle and thread she kept in her satchel. When she finished, she hung it from a tree branch to dry and resumed her post, carefully watching the flock.

An hour passed, and Colette drifted to the far side of the clearing, patting the friendlier sheep that greeted her. She did another scan of the meadow and froze when she realized she and the sheep were not alone.

A young man leading a horse emerged from the woods on the opposite end of the meadow. Colette's princess training took over as she took careful inventory of the intruder. His horse was of fine stock, elegant and willowy—a riding horse, not a war horse—and wore enough colorful tack and trappings to promise his owner was in a fine financial state. The young man himself was dressed in a leather jerkin—misleading, for Colette could see the glitter of golden embroidery on his silken undershirt.

He was, at bare minimum, a noble.

Not bad, Colette thought. Nobles usually didn't deign to take notice of shepherdesses and their sheep, so he presented very little danger. *But if that is so…why is he looking at me like that?*

Colette shifted slightly and realized with horror that she still wore her palace clothes and was actually presentable-looking. *Ahh, yes. That would do it.* She grabbed fistfuls of her skirts and prepared to run.

She was still in her father's kingdom. The last thing she wanted was for a big-mouthed noble to scurry home and gab about the shepherdess who dressed like a princess.

She spun around and started running—intending to disappear into the forest.

"Wait, you needn't flee on my account," the young man said with oddly accented words.

Colette ran faster.

He started to pursue her, then he cut off with a muffled oath as a sheep baaed.

Colette turned around, her heart thrumming in her throat, and laughed. It seemed the noble young man had tripped on a sheep and was now getting a face full of wool and bells.

Shaking her head, Colette skipped far enough into the woods that he could not see her, then shimmied up a tree—which was

a much harder feat in her elegant gown than her work dress—and clung to the trunk.

A few moments later, he rode past, stopping his horse almost directly under her tree. “Hello? I didn’t mean to frighten you…I mean you no harm.”

Colette observed that the young noble had a handsome face to match his clothes, and he was tall and lean like the typical knights embroidered into tapestries.

“He’s not from here,” Colette murmured as she watched him ride off. His words were more lyrical than the usual accent.

She waited until she could no longer hear his horse, then dropped down from her perch. In moments, she was back in the meadow. “We’re leaving for a different pasture, my woolies.” She hurriedly picked her way towards the stream. “But only after I don my disguise again!”

When Colette drove the sheep back down to the farm in the late afternoon, the farmer was waiting for her.

“Shepherdess, did you come ‘cross anyone up in the meadows today?” He asked.

“Nope.” She lied without thinking as she nudged the last sheep into the pen. She caught sight of the handsome foreigner lingering near the stable, and her grumbling stomach stilled. *The fickle finger of fate strikes at the worst of times. He may be smart enough to realize it was me!* Though she had mud smears on her face and was safely in her work dress, she didn’t want to take any chances.

“Oh! I almost forgot!” She made a show of smacking her palm into her forehead. “I saw a very pretty lady, surely of noble blood. I think she must have been lost.”

The noble stranger shifted, and Colette hastily enlarged her story. “But not ten minutes after I saw her, some knights rode through searching for her. I’m sure they found her.”

The farmer turned around and doffed his hat at the man. “There you have it, Sir. That beautiful lady you’re so concerned about must be safe and sound. Our shepherdess is a clever girl; I’m sure she’s right about the knights.”

Colette exhaled, drooping in relief. The farmer, at least, bought the story. With luck, the noble would believe it as well and ride on.

Her relief was short lived as the young man straightened and approached them. “A clever shepherdess? How unusual.” His silken, lyrical voice was so beautiful to listen to, Colette’s only choice was to despise it. This close, she could see he had intelligent, amber-colored eyes that were a stark contrast to his dark hair.

When she realized he was still drawing closer, she tilted her head and scrubbed at her nose with the back of her hand. “Hullo, sir. Are you chasing after the pretty lady, too?”

He smiled down at her with slightly boyish charm that took some of the fox-like wiliness out of his eyes. “I am. Though I’m afraid I don’t share your belief that she is gone.”

Darn it, he doesn’t believe me. Colette tucked her chin into her neck. “Oh?”

His manners were impeccable, but although he stood a proper distance from her, she couldn’t help but feel that he was still too close. “Indeed, but I am thankful for the information all the same. What is your name?”

“Uh, my name?” Colette garbled. The farmer and his family had never asked for a name—they just called her shepherdess!

The foxy look was back in his eyes as he leaned forward. “Yes.”

“Um…” Colette glanced at the farmer—who was cooing over Fat Face and completely oblivious to the sly noble. “I don’t give my name to strangers?” she finished weakly.

The young man blinked once, then laughed kindly. “I see—that is very wise of you. Then allow me to introduce myself. I am Sir Rainer, at your service.” The bow he gave her was far

too elaborate for a mere knight. The wink he added when he caught her gaze said he was aware she knew it, too.

"That's very good of you, sir. Most folks call me Shepherdess, but my name is…" She paused for a moment, trying to come up with a name, any name. Why hadn't she prepared for this? She was unsteady and frightened enough to use her childhood nickname. "Collie."

Rainer blinked. "Like the herding dog?"

Colette squinted at him as she considered how upset the farmer would be with her if she happened to fling sheep dung at the noble sir. She also wondered if others were as irritated with her when she was being "clever" as she felt with Rainer right now. "It was an omen to my life's calling," she said bitingly.

Rainer laughed again, which slightly mollified Colette, for he didn't have the tittering, scathing laugh of most nobles.

Perhaps he would be a match for Arianna and her songbird laugh.

"I apologize, Collie. It is rude of me to laugh over your name." He smiled momentarily, then wrinkled his brow. "Collie," he murmured as if tasting the name. He tilted his head as he eyed her once more.

Right. It was time for her to escape. "Very good of you, sir. Now, if you'll excuse me—the sheep need tending." Colette grabbed a wooden bucket and hurried off to the well to draw water for the wooly creatures.

Today was a close call, but no harm will come from it. I don't imagine a foreign noble would remain in these parts for longer than a day—thank goodness!

COLETTE WAS DREADFULLY WRONG. Sir Rainer did not ride on as she expected. Instead, he tarried in a nearby village and spent his days trailing her.

After the fifth day of it, he had worn Colette down enough that she snarled. “Don’t you have better things to do? Lands to oversee or some such thing?”

Rainer held his hand over his heart. “Why, Collie, you wound me so! I am, after all, searching with great determination and worry for the fair maiden!”

Colette adjusted a sheep’s collar. “Then why do you keep following a bunch of sheep?”

“My theory is that she will return to these parts,” Rainer said.

“Is that so?” Colette said dryly.

She was more irritated than afraid of Rainer by this point and was not very worried of the threat he posed. As he was not from her father’s courts, he had no reason to be looking for her, and even if he suspected who she was, he could never prove it. He hadn’t met her before. (Of this Colette was certain; she would have absolutely remembered meeting anyone half as handsome or irritating.)

Besides, the only proof Colette had of her own identity was her gown and jewels—and they still rested in her satchel that never left her grasp.

She fussed with the straps of her satchel as she gazed out at the meadow—searching for Fat Face.

Rainer plopped down at her feet, rolled on to his back, and yawned. He hadn’t even bothered to bring his horse today. “Besides, I’d be kicking up my heels in these parts even if I wasn’t searching for the lady,” he said. “I’m waiting for my father to join me. He has business at the capital he wanted me to be present for.”

Colette propped her hands on her hips. “I see.”

A sheep baaed, and a few bells jingled. “Say, Collie,” Rainer said. “Is that *really* your name?”

“Of course it is.” She shielded her eyes and counted up the baby lambs. “And it is shockingly rude of you to ask that.” She took a small step forward, trying to spot the last lamb, but she had forgotten Rainer was splayed there. She tripped and fell

directly on him. “Oof—sorry!” she scrambled to get off him, but something snagged her foot and she fell again, landing on the grass next to him.

“Are you alright?” he asked. He brushed off her shoulder and satchel.

Colette launched to her feet. “I’m fine—stop touching me.”

Rainer offered her a crooked grin. “I apologize. I overstepped my bounds, but you were wearing enough grass to tempt a sheep.”

Colette peered down at her dress and shook off a few remaining tufts of grass. “When will your father come for you?”

“Are you so looking forward to our parting? Collie, you wound me!”

Colette rolled her eyes in disgust as Rainer winked at her.

“I expect it won’t be long now—a day or two at most. Mother might come with him—that would be lucky,” Rainer said.

“Why lucky?” Colette asked. She carefully picked her way around Rainer, and finally counted the last lamb.

“Because then they could give me their blessing together,” Rainer said.

“For what?”

He smiled proudly. “Why, to search for the beautiful lady, of course!”

Colette heaved her eyes heavenward. “Your parents must be saints.”

“I think they’ll approve,” Rainer said.

The teasing was gone from his voice. He sounded so serious, Colette peered down at him.

His amber eyes glowed with the foxy-wiliness she hadn’t seen in them for a while. “Actually, I think they’ll more than approve,” he said.

Apprehensive for a reason she couldn’t quite put her finger on, Colette shivered. “Then I wish you luck on your search. Oi—Fat Face!” Colette sprinted after the sheep, not because it was

making for the woods, but because she wanted an excuse, any excuse, to retreat from Rainer's intense gaze.

THREE MORE DAYS PASSED, and finally there came a morning that Rainer was not waiting for her in the meadows.

Colette heaved a sigh in relief and was so giddy, she almost laughed and danced. "His father must have arrived and dragged him on. Good riddance!" She tried to cuddle a lamb, but it wriggled out of her grasp. She lazily flopped over in the grass and repeated, "Good riddance."

But as happy as his disappearance had made her in the morning, by late afternoon—when Colette began to guide the sheep back to the farm, she was forced to admit that she missed his company and his witticisms.

Their banter had been enjoyable. And she never feared she would offend him because he misinterpreted her words.

Colette was so distracted with this idea that she didn't notice the farmer until he was at her elbow.

"You're wanted in the village, Shepherdess." He scratched a sheep on the head and smiled.

Worry stiffened her spine. "What for?"

"That foreign lord who's been hanging round these parts took ill. He wants to see you."

Colette bit her lip. "Is he terribly sick?"

The farmer shrugged. "Folks say he can't eat. He's staying at the Nimble Nag Inn. You can take one of the donkeys. Do you know the way?"

Colette hitched her satchel up her back and hurried to close the gate. "Yes, thank you!"

The farmer waved as Colette rushed to the stables and saddled one of the farm donkeys. It huffed at being dragged from its hay, but it carried Colette down the road and towards the village without much fuss.

The village was less than half an hour away at a brisk walk, so it didn't take Colette long to reach the crusty inn and hitch the donkey outside.

She slipped inside, feeling a little self conscious in her muddy and tattered dress as the innkeeper raised an eyebrow at her. "I'm here to see Sir Rainer," she said.

"You're Collie?" the innkeeper asked. He was dressed fastidiously, though his nose looked like he had broken it in a fight years ago.

"Yes."

The innkeeper grunted and gestured for her to follow. He took her up the stairs and opened a door for her.

Colette poked her head inside, half-expecting to find Rainer pale and on his deathbed. Her heart stilled with fright, for he was splayed out across his bed. But he picked his head up with clear curiosity, then dropped it back onto the bed when he saw Colette.

"Oh, Collie, it is so kind of you to visit me when I feel so *ill*!" he said. He coughed pitifully and sighed with obvious over-acting.

Colette growled under her breath and was irritated she had worried about him. "You look fine."

"Yes, but my heart is in such a tangle I cannot eat. I am wasting away!" Rainer said.

Colette narrowed her eyes. "You ate enough for two people yesterday at noon."

"That was yesterday," Rainer said smoothly. "It is today that is the problem. I will soon die from lack of nourishment."

"It seems she does not believe you, son."

Colette jumped when she realized Rainer was not alone. A graceful woman was seated on a rickety chair in the corner. She had Rainer's dark hair—hers was streaked with silver—and pronounced smile lines that gave her an impish look. Though she wore a fine gown of silk brocade—the kind Colette's mother wore—she smiled kindly at Colette. "She seems far too smart to fall for your antics. Hello, Collie. I must thank you for

entertaining my young whelp this past week." Her voice was just as lyrical and pleasant to listen to as Rainer's.

"It was nothing, my lady." Colette almost automatically curtsied, but cut it off at the last moment so she awkwardly wobbled.

"Mother," Rainer squawked. "How can you be so cruel? I am starving—I have not eaten at all for this entire day."

"This is the truth," his mother admitted.

Colette sighed and adjusted her satchel. "What do you want, Rainer?"

Rainer smiled and sat up. "I want you to make bread for me."

She didn't even have to think about her reply. "No."

Rainer's smile turned into a caress. "Ahh, but Collie, I'm afraid I can't eat anything if it isn't made by your hands."

"Then you'll have to starve," Colette said.

Rainer's eyes glowed, and all signs of mirth were gone. "Please, Collie?"

Colette shut her eyes in defeat. "I can't make normal bread—it needs time to rise and I need to return to the farm. But I can make a quick bread. Just this once."

Rainer leaned back in his bed again. Though he didn't smile, it was impossible to miss the triumphant tilt to his lips. "Of course. I will recover the instant I taste it. Innkeeper, would you be so kind as to lend Collie the use of your kitchens?"

The innkeeper bowed. "Of course, sir." He again motioned for Colette to follow him.

She was given a small corner of a wooden table to make and knead her dough. She worked quietly, content to listen to the other women bustle around the hot kitchen, making dinner for the inn's guests.

She made a small loaf barely bigger than a roll and helped scrub wooden dishes as her thanks to the innkeeper while she waited for the bread to bake.

When it was finished, she carried it up to Rainer's room on a small wooden plate and thrust it into his lap. "Here. I hope this

ends your *illness*."

Rainer, his hands clasped together, gave Colette his half smile. "You are a hidden gem, Collie."

"I thank you for your assistance," Rainer's mother said. "He becomes stubborn over the oddest of things." She affectionately shook her head, then gestured to the chair beside her. "Won't you sit with me for a moment?"

Colette was trying to figure out how to politely decline while still sounding like a peasant, when a man with Rainer's amber eyes leaned in the doorway. "So this is the girl you have been mooning over, Rainer?"

"Father! Come in and meet Collie," Rainer invited.

Rainer's father was broader than his son through the shoulders but perhaps was not quite as tall. He had a thick beard, and, like Rainer, his golden eyes were clear and kind.

He took Colette's hand and bowed over it. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Collie. If even half of Rainer's praises are not exaggerated, you are a lovely girl."

Yep. They're all nobles—although they're the strangest nobles I've ever heard of. Why would they cavort with a shepherdess?

Colette cleared her throat and planned her escape. "Thank you. Beggin' your pardon, but I should leave—"

She broke off when Rainer made a muffled noise.

His face wrinkled with confusion, Rainer—having just taken a bite of the bread—spat out something golden and glittering into his palm. He stared down at it, then looked to Colette. "Collie…it was you I saw that afternoon, wasn't it?" he asked.

Colette took a step towards the door. "W-what?"

Solemnly, Rainer held up the gold ring he had almost swallowed.

Colette instantly recognized it. The band had little birds etched into it. It was a birthday gift from Arianna. It was the only piece she had brought with her that she hadn't planned on selling, and it had come because of her fondness for it and her affection for her sister.

Before she could stop herself, she flipped her satchel open and peered inside. Sure enough, the ring was not there. Fleetingly, she recalled tripping and falling on Rainer, and the way he had fussed over her bag. Outraged, she tossed her satchel down. “You stole that!”

“I did not,” Rainer said. “It was baked into the bread.”

“I would never be stupid enough to wear jewelry while baking. Give it back!” She froze when she realized what her words confirmed. She peeked down at her feet where her gown and the rest of her jewelry spilled from her satchel.

It was suddenly hard to swallow as she looked from Rainer to his parents.

“Colette,” Rainer said with his playful expression. “You can’t think so little of my intelligence as to believe I didn’t know who you were?” He tossed the ring back to her.

Colette caught it with shaking hands. “But how could you know? You’re not from here.”

Rainer shot a triumphant look at his father. “I told you she was clever.”

“Rainer,” she growled.

Rainer popped out of his bed and bowed. “Please allow me the honor of introducing my parents, King Gunther and the fair Queen Ishield.”

The room seemed to cave in on Colette. These wonderfully pleasant people were the rulers her father so disdained?

“I was a little surprised you did not recognize my name, but then since you’ve been away from the capital for so long, I imagine you didn’t know to expect us,” Rainer continued.

Colette laughed nervously. “That is quite true,” she lied. She had never known the names of King Gunther and Queen Ishield’s children. She had, in fact, only ever heard Rainer referred to as “the prancing prat.” “What brings you to my father’s kingdom?”

“Indirectly, you,” Rainer said.

The door frame creaked as King Gunther draped more of his weight against it. “Since your disappearance, your father

became convinced we had you kidnapped. We were journeying to meet him and assure him we had not seen you."

Colette frowned. *What foolishness are they speaking of? Father sent me from the palace himself!*

Queen Ishield stood and smiled benevolently. "Fate seems to have intervened, so now we travel to meet him for a far more joyful reason."

"Oh?" Colette politely enquired.

Rainer shifted his stance and pointedly watched his parents.

"Come, Gunther. I believe we are wanted downstairs." Queen Ishield sailed from the room.

"Now? But the best part is coming," King Gunther said.

"Yes, now." The queen was the picture of elegance and serenity as she started down the stairs.

King Gunther sighed and joined her. "I wanted to watch her make him squirm."

The queen's voice was barely audible. "I'm sure you'll have plenty of opportunities to witness such an occasion later."

Colette self-consciously tugged on a sleeve of her dress. "What are they talking about?"

"Us," Rainer crossed the room, closed the door, and then leaned up against it. The playfulness in his eyes was gone as he dropped to one knee. "They know I'm going to ask you to marry me."

She gawked down at him. "You cannot be serious."

"But I am."

"You are *not* in love with me!"

He shook his head with a small smile. "Absolutely head over heels."

Colette scowled. Years of her father's complaints and troubles nipped at her heels, making her remember King Gunther's many successful military campaigns and the probable quest to extend their lands. "This is a political move, isn't it? You must not know: I'm the second princess. Marrying me won't open up any opportunities."

“I don’t care about opportunities. I care about you.” His eyes glittered, and there wasn’t even a hint of a smile on his lips.

“But you *can’t*!” Colette’s legs gave out from underneath her, and she plopped down on the ground next to him. “I’m annoying and opinionated. I say things without thinking them through. I read too much, and I’m too cursed curious. I will make a horrible wife for a prince!”

Now Rainer did smile, but it wasn’t his playful grin. It was a heavier gesture weighed down with passion. “You’re wrong. I *know* you Colette.”

“How can you? It’s only been a week,” Colette snarled.

“A day would have been enough.” Rainer, still kneeling, leaned towards her. “You are kind and thoughtful. You are meticulous in carrying out your duties—no matter how small they may be—and though you might grumble, you will do everything in your power to aid those who are placed in your care, whether they are sheep or human. But most of all, Colette, you are dazzlingly clever. I adore your intelligent mind and your witty comebacks! In short, I love you.”

He scooted closer and, in spite of the dirt on Colette’s face and her dress that smelled strongly of sheep, enfolded her in his arms and scooped her against his chest. “Say yes, please. Say you’ll marry me.”

Colette’s self-control escaped her, and she set her head on his shoulder.

Rainer tugged her hair free from the bun it was shoved in. “If you don’t say yes, I intend to stay here and wile my days away wooing you while my parents move on,” he added.

A choked laugh gurgled out of her throat. “I love you as well.” She shocked herself with her own daring, and was even further startled to realize it was true. Not long ago she had wondered if she could truly be herself anywhere. She now knew she could be…with Rainer.

“So you’ll marry me?”

“It is impulsive and brash of us; we haven’t known each other very long.”

“Yes, but will you marry me?”

Colette pulled back so she could peer into his amber eyes. “Yes.”

With a grin and a glitter in his eyes, Rainer kissed her.

It was a soul-searing kiss that nearly overwhelmed Colette with its passion. But it had an amazingly sweet flavor to it as well, for Colette had found someone who understood her and treasured her.

So while embracing her future husband on the floor of a dusty room in a backwater inn was most assuredly *not* what a normal princess would desire, Colette couldn’t help thinking that it was perfect for them.

Colette smiled and waved to the subjects that recognized her as she—riding side-by-side with Rainer—wound through the streets. Together they, with King Gunther and Queen Ishield in front of them and a retinue of soldiers behind them, were slowly making their way through the capital of Colette’s kingdom, ambling towards the palace.

A week had passed since Colette agreed to marry Rainer. While she was anxious to see Rainer’s kingdom, she knew she couldn’t leave her homeland yet. She needed to make amends with her father and, hopefully, obtain his blessing for her marriage.

Her stay in the countryside had opened her eyes to a new world, but it had also helped Colette see that even if her father squinted at her when she tried to say something witty and occasionally was cranky when she pushed him too far…he was still her father. And she still loved him very much.

It had taken several days to prepare for the journey to King Louis’ capital. She had to explain the situation to the farmer and his family—he was surprised; his wife was not—and for the

first time since she left the palace, she took a bath, donned her fancy dress, and wore some of the jewelry she had packed.

They traveled at a sedate pace, giving Colette a chance to speak with Rainer and her future in-laws. Though she still had some reservations over her future homeland, she was surprised to learn that further expanding his kingdom was the farthest thing from King Gunther's mind. ("I have more than enough problems and work the way it is. Why would I want to increase my workload even more so? A good commander knows his limits!")

These revelations greatly buoyed her spirits, for she had feared her father may very well die of heart palpitations when she sashayed up to him and announced her engagement to the "prancing prat."

With her fears substantially calmed, Colette was all smiles as they approached her family's palace. After all, what could go wrong?

Colette's dainty mare snorted as they rode up the open lane that led to the palace gate. "I apologize beforehand if my father is…displeased with my return home," Colette said. (It had, after all, been less than three months since he had kicked her out, and he had warned her not to return for a year.)

"I am certain he will be very happy to see you," Queen Ishield said.

"He better be," King Gunther complained. "He raised a big enough stink about her disappearance!"

The royal procession stopped at the palace gates—massive gaudy things that were, at the moment, shut up tight. The area was as quiet as a tomb. Only the flapping of a city banner broke the silence.

Colette frowned. "Hello?"

A knight strode down the battlement—the walkway on top of the palace wall. "You are late."

Colette glanced worriedly at Rainer and shifted in her side saddle. "I beg your pardon?"

“Are you not the party of King Gunther and Queen Ishield?” The knight pointedly stared at King Gunther’s banner, carried by one of the guards.

King Gunther bowed atop his horse. “Indeed, I am King Gunther.”

“You were supposed to arrive several days ago. You are *late*,” the knight repeated.

King Gunther’s soldiers discreetly shifted until several of them stood in front of Colette and Rainer, and a few more shifted past King Gunther and Queen Ishield.

Colette’s mare swished her tail as a dragonfly buzzed nearby. “It’s my fault they were delayed,” Colette said. “If Father is angered, please make sure he understands it was not their doing, but mine.”

The knight almost lurched over the side of the wall. “Princess *Colette*?”

Colette smiled. “I’m afraid so. Could you let us in, now?”

The knight whirled around, not hearing her. “They have the princess! Princess Colette travels with them!”

“But—the gate! And he’s gone.” Colette sighed as they were once again left alone at the closed gate. Slightly embarrassed, she cleared her throat. “I apologize. Usually Father is meticulously well organized.”

“No harm done,” Rainer said cheerfully. “If you had run off and left me alone, I would be more than just a bit disorganized.”

Colette turned to her handsome fiancé and smiled. But she pressed her lips together and squinted up at the battlement as the footfalls of many feet thudded down it. Most of them were guards and soldiers, but she spotted one handsome head that sported a gold crown.

“Daughter?” King Louis shouted down to her.

“Hello, Father,” Colette said.

“So it is as I feared,” King Louis said. “Did these villainous rogues capture you after my foolish decree against you?”

“What?” Colette owlishly blinked. “No, they didn’t capture me.”

“Why else would you ride with them?” King Louis asked.

“It’s because I…we…”

“We’re engaged,” Rainer helpfully chimed in.

Colette nudged her mare over a step so she and Rainer could discreetly clasp hands.

The men on the battlement were silent.

“So it has come to this,” King Louis said.

“I beg your pardon?” King Gunther said.

“You have forced my daughter into a marriage with your offspring!” King Louis thundered.

“No—Father, I love Rainer!” Colette shouted.

“Worry not, daughter. I can see how the soldiers surround you—I know you are being forced to say lies,” King Louis said.

“But I’m not,” Colette said.

“If you villains do not hand over the princess,” the unhelpful knight from before yelled, “we will take aim!”

At least twenty archers lined up on the battlements, their bows creaking as they nocked arrows and pulled back on their bowstrings.

King Gunther murmured to his men, who were already lifting their shields up.

“Wait! Father, I’m telling the truth. I swear so on Arianna’s beauty!” Colette swung her mare in front of Rainer’s mount, trying to block him.

King Louis grimly shook his head. “I failed you when I sent you from the palace, Colette. But I will not let you be thrown to these dogs. Worry not! You will soon be rescued.”

If she weren’t so scared, Colette would have screamed in irritation.

“Father! Wait, Father! Hold back, they can’t fire!” Arianna—beautiful and lovely though her skirts were slightly askew and her hair loose—ran down the battlements. “Father, they *can’t* have kidnapped Colette. She’s been working as a shepherdess

this whole time.” Arianna panted so hard Colette could barely understand her.

“Stand down, Arianna,” King Louis snapped. He was angry, for the first time Colette could ever recall, with his oldest daughter. “You have no knowledge of the situation.”

“Why didn’t you tell him where I was?” Colette hollered up at her older sister.

“You told me not to!”

“Yes, but I didn’t know he would go *crazy* because of it!”

“Surely we can clear matters without hostilities,” Queen Ishield said.

“You have my precious daughter. I will move the world to see her returned, no matter what calamity I bring upon myself,” King Louis said.

Colette wanted to cry. This was what she had always wanted —to know how deeply her Father cared for her. But why did it have to be right this moment, and in this particular way?

“Colette, move back.” Rainer’s voice was low, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

“No—Rainer, we can’t fight,” Colette said. “It will start a war.”

“I don’t care. I’m not giving you up,” Rainer said.

“I don’t think he’ll give us a choice, Colette,” King Gunther said. “You are better off retreating with Queen Ishield. We’ll join you shortly.”

“No, we can get through this if everyone would just *stop* grabbing for their weapons!” Colette said.

Rainer drew his sword. “I’m afraid it’s too late for that.”

“The fiend—he means to strike down the princess!” the knight shouted.

“Archers, ready!” King Louis shouted.

“Father, don’t!” Arianna pleaded.

King Louis ignored her. “On my mark!”

“Shields up!” King Gunther shouted.

Panic flooded Colette as a soldier grabbed her mare’s bridle and dragged her away. “Wait, don’t!”

“Aim,” King Louis shouted.

“Father!” Colette screamed. “If I love you as I love the salt on my food, I love Rainer as I love the sugar in my cake!” She scrunched her eyes shut, afraid to see what would happen next.

Everything was silent.

“You mean it…don’t you?” King Louis asked.

Colette was so relieved she almost started crying. “Yes!”

After a few moments, the golden gates swung open, and King Louis himself stood in the entrance. “Daughter?”

Colette flung herself from her horse and ran to her father, crying as she buried her face in his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” King Louis whispered. “I am so sorry.”

With the near crises averted, King Louis welcomed King Gunther, Queen Ishield, and Prince Rainer into the palace. He made every effort to treat the foreign royalty with the warmth and respect he reserved for his closest friends. After giving his blessing to Colette’s engagement with Rainer, everyone thawed considerably, though it was not a relaxing visit.

The wedding date was set for three months from that day, and Arianna used every skill of persuasion in her possession to talk her parents into allowing her to accompany Colette to her new country and prepare for the celebration.

Three months passed like the blink of an eye, and sooner than Colette expected, the day of her wedding had arrived.

Colette leaned back in her chair with a thump, feeling as used as a damp rag. She inspected the tables arranged around the room, holding nobles, royalty, and guests from all the neighboring kingdoms.

The wedding was a success.

“Is everything alright, wife?” Rainer kissed her on the cheek, then leaned his forehead against hers.

“Everything is wonderful,” she said firmly. “I just can’t believe we got through it without our fathers shouting at each other.”

“I think they’ve come remarkably far,” Rainer said. “They haven’t rumbled about politics since your family arrived.”

“I’m surprised, but overjoyed, that you aren’t as angry with my father as King Gunther has been,” Colette said.

“Of course not,” Rainer scoffed. “King Louis has a fearfully powerful pardon in my mind as he sired you, and *you* are my everything.”

He tried to kiss her, but Colette nudged him in the ribs. “We cannot carry on in front of everyone,” she warned him.

“It’s our *wedding* feast.” Rainer tilted his head and gave her his most innocent expression—failing horribly, as his amber eyes sparkled with unholy glee.

“You are incorrigible,” Colette muttered. She let Rainer take her hand as he returned his attention to Queen Ishield, who sat on his other side.

Colette squeezed his hand as she turned to her other dinner partner, her father. “Are you enjoying the feast, Father?”

“Yes, of course. King Gunther and Queen Ishield are fabulous hosts,” King Louis said. He smiled at her as he listlessly pushed meat around his plate.

Colette hid a smile. “Really?” she asked with as much innocence as she could muster. “But you do not appear to enjoy your dinner.”

“Ah, well…” King Louis glanced down at his plate. “In truth, I am rethinking my wedding gift to you. Perhaps I ought to send a cook with the rest of your gifts.”

“Oh? Why do you think another cook is necessary?”

“The food is a bit….”

“Tasteless?” Colette asked.

King Louis studied her, probably having heard the hidden edge to Colette’s question.

Colette's smile turned genuine as she offered her father a small bowl of salt. "The fault of the food lies with me. I asked the cook to refrain from seasoning your food." She hesitated and wondered if he understood.

King Louis stared at his plate. "So this is how much you love me—that without me, life is tasteless?"

Colette only nodded. She dared not to speak.

To her surprise, King Louis' eyes glazed over with unshed tears. "Daughter, I am so sorry."

Colette pulled her hand from Rainer's grasp so she could hug her father. "It's fine, Father, as long as you know, now, how much I really love you."

Father and daughter embraced with laughter and perhaps a few tears. When they parted, Rainer again reclaimed her hand.

"I am so lucky to have such a clever wife," he murmured.

Colette snorted. "I don't think any other princes would agree with you."

Rainer shook his head. "That is their loss. As for me, I find cleverness a *very* desirable trait. Though I must say I'm rather smug as I already understand your wit."

Colette raised an eyebrow at her husband. "Oh? Why is that an occasion for smugness?"

"I wouldn't like to eat cake made without sugar."

Colette laughed, and he continued. "Though it does frighten me that you are already so well liked by the kitchen staff you could persuade them to serve a *king* tasteless food."

"It's because I understand, at least a little, how difficult their tasks are," she said.

"Aw," Rainer cooed. "Missing Fat Face, are you? We could always send for that sheep."

"Don't you dare," Colette hissed.

"Why not? You don't want it running about the castle like a wooly dog?"

"No, it's because the farmer loved that sheep. It would break his heart to sell Fat Face, but he would do it if we asked."

Rainer leaned back in his chair and laughed so hard he slapped his thigh.

Colette ignored his display and sipped her wine.

Before she could protest, Rainer swooped in and dropped a quick kiss on her lips. “I love you, my clever, sheep-herding princess,” he murmured.

Colette smiled. “And I love you, my cunning, prancing prince.”

And so the clever princess and the sly prince lived happily ever after.

THE END

For more information on the author and free extras please visit:
kmshea.com

FROM THE AUTHOR

Thanks for reading my starter package!

I hope it gave you an idea what my voice as a writer is like and what kinds of books I like to write (and read).

Did you enjoy “Trials of a First Knight”? Then you’ll love the urban fantasy trilogy its characters are from, Hall of Blood and Mercy. This trilogy has a paranormal twist and is filled with humor, magic, and a slow-burn romance!

Interested in my fairy tales? I would suggest starting with The Snow Queen series (Heart of Ice is the first book of this two-book series) or Beauty and the Beast from the Timeless Fairy Tale series. The first eight books in the Timeless Fairy Tales series are stand-alone stories you can read in any order, although the events of each book will provide glimpses of the bigger picture. Starting with book nine—in this eleven-book series—the books still contain a main stand-alone tale but they also have spoilers for the subsequent books.

Epic fantasy more your thing? Then the Fairy Tale Enchantress series (Apprentice of Magic is the first book) should suit you well! This series follows an enchantress-in-training, Angelique, as she struggles against the darkness that threatens her lands. It ties into my Timeless Fairy Tale series, but it’s not necessary to read that series first.

If you liked “Calling of a King,” then please check out the King Arthur and her Knights series. The first book is titled

Enthroned, and the series is complete and finished. The first six King Arthur books are considered novellas due to their shorter length and are written in an episodic format.

If you are more of a romance fan and enjoyed “Before the Bond,” I suggest you try the first book in The Elves of Lessa series, Red Rope of Fate. It is a sweet/clean high fantasy romance that follows the relationship between the elf maiden Tari and the human captain, Arion. Each book in this series features a different couple but takes place in the same world, so look forward to more elf love stories!

Finally, the free fun doesn’t have to end here! You can check out the freebies section of my website for more free content. But be warned! Some freebies contain spoilers for my other books.

Thank you for reading the starter package, and welcome to the family, Champion!

OTHER BOOKS BY K. M. SHEA

The Snow Queen:

Heart of Ice

Sacrifice

Snowflakes: A Snow Queen Short Story Collection

Timeless Fairy Tales:

Beauty and the Beast

The Wild Swans

Cinderella and the Colonel

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Royal Magic

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